MEN FOR ALL SEASONS
1 John 1:1 - 2:5
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Bethany Presbyterian Church
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John M. Buchanan

Sir Thomas More, "The Man For All Seasons" in Robert Bolt's play and the excellent motion picture of the same name, was one of the most popular and influential men of his day. Henry VIII was King of England and Europe was embroiled in wars, intrigue, political and social ferment. In England Thomas More was respected by all, including the King, for his integrity, wisdom and courage. He lived comfortably, but not lavishly: he was a Councilman and therefore responsible for judicial decisions in the area of his estate. He was appointed Chancellor of all England at a very important time.

King Henry was married to his brother's widow, Katherine. The wedding had been made possible by a special Papal dispensation. But Katherine bore no sons who lived: Henry grew tired of her and had fallen in love with a beautiful young lady in his court, Anne Boleyn. Henry went back to the Pope appealing for another dispensation: this time an annulment of his marriage to Katherin on the grounds that it wasn't legal in the first place - so that he might marry Anne.

But this time the Pope refused. Henry and all of England were incensed. The people were with their King: the church - anxious to find a reason for pulling out of the Church of Rome - supported the King. Everyone favored the proposed marriage to Anne Boleyn - all but Sir Thomas More. He could not and would not support it. Rather than embarrass the King, to whom he was deeply loyal - and rather than compromise his conscience to which he was even more deeply loyal, Sir Thomas resigned as Chancellor and asked only to be allowed to live quietly with his family. The King, however, was put in a very awkward position. More than any other man in the realm the opinions of Sir Thomas More wre important.

The King tried everything to persuade Thomas More to change his mind: his friends and finally his family begged him to compromise. Eventually he was arrested, thrown in the Tower of London, tried and beheaded for treason.

The play is the story of a man who stood head and shoulders above his peers because he could be pushed only so far: he knew what was basic and irrevocable for him - and at that point he was willing to take his stand. He was honest and courageous, but most of all - timely. He sensed what the real and sometimes hidden issues of his day were: he chose the battlefield - the issue - and there took his stand. He was "A Man for All Seasons".

Think now about another story. The place is Asia Minor, or what is now Western Turkey: the time - about 95 A.D. An old and beloved leader of the Christian Church in Asia Minor realized that it was an extremely crucial time for the Christian Faith. Tradition has it that John, the Author of the three small letters in the New Testament that bear his name, was one of the last individuals alive at the time who had actually seen and known Jesus of Nazareth. Robert Browning wrote a poem about him that captures the importance of this old man to the early church, and the issue that was disturbing him - even on his death-bed.. "there is left on earth no one alive who knew - saw with his own eyes and handled with his own hands, that which was from the first, the Word of Life. How will it be when none more saith, 'I saw'?"

The real problem in Asia Minor at the time was Gnosticism, a vague, mystical religion that emphasized knowledge and understanding as the way of salvation. There was no head-on conflict. -would have been simpler. Instead But there was compromise and synthesis as Gnosticism and the Gospel of Jesus Christ came into contact. Jesus was regarded by the Gnostics as another source of knowledge: they could the Gnostics ~~could~~ accept his divinity - but not his humanity: they would not accept the reality of human sin - and they were simply unconcerned about the deeply ethical quality of the Christian life because of their overwhelming obsession with their own immortality.

John became the man for all season: he saw what the issue was: he understood that if that which is basic and irrevocable about Christian Faith was not written down - the faith would soon cease to be Christian. Under those conditions one would expect him to have written a stirring polemic against the Gnostic heresy, or at least a detailed and lengthy explication of Christian doctrine. Instead he wrote three small letters - two of which are little more than notes.

Theologically, they are rather simple. The Gospel, John asserted, was real and not speculative. "It was there from the beginning" he wrote. The Gospel is relevant rather than other-worldly. "We've heard it - seen it - felt it" he wrote. It has to do with the here and now - and not just some idea of immortality after death. And it all hangs on love - God's love for man: God's nature as love - and the new life of love to be practiced in the Christian community. The Gnostics didn't know anything about that part, and the old man dealt with them rather bluntly. Later in his first letter he wrote: "If a man says he loves God, and hates his brother, he is a liar."

Coming through it all is the message that Christians - if they were to survive as Christians - would have to become Men for All Seasons. They would have to know what was basic in their faith: and they would have to believe it in a way that was relevant to what was happening in thier world. That, in sum, is the essence of these three little letters. The Gospel - as it is believed and lived by individual Christians -must stand the test of the world. It must be timely - relevant -

That idea is basic to Christian Faith in any age or season: that is, that Christians are to be Christians in the world and not apart from it: that Christians are to be involved in the world: reflecting what's happening in the world: letting the world set the agenda for the style of their faith.

That was John's style as he distilled the faith down into several simple maxims that could stand the test of the Gnostics. It was Paul's style when he noted that he would be "all things to all men." Certainly that's what Jesus meant when he urged his disciples to be like salt and light and leaven in the bread. None of those things are worth anything until they are applied to something else - light to darkness : salt to food: leaven to dough.

An anonymous Second Centurey letter written to a man named Diognetus describes it rather well: "Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life.... But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship which they set forth, is marvelous and confessedly contradicts expectations..." ~~(The Difference in Being a Christian Today - J. A. T. Robinson P. 30-31)~~

That has been basic to Christian Faith from the beginning. And yet the history of the Christian Church is often a different story altogether. The Church has spent much of its time either trying to force its agenda on the world in terms of raw political power - or beating a hasty retreat from the world. From the Papal insistence in the Middle Ages that the world was the center of the universe and not the sun, the arrogance of 19th century missionaries who could not accept the mores and customs and beauty of people they wanted to save, to the lingering, pathetic attempt to sneak the Christian Scriptures into the public schools - even if through the back door - the Church has notorously insisted that it's agenda was best for

the world. And when it hasn't been doing that it has been retreating into monasteries, or to worn-out, irrelevant beliefs that no one takes seriously anymore - things like, ("God is the Answer") - and the world is literally snapping back, ("We forgot the question".)

Our job is to take our world seriously: to take what is basic for us out into the world to be believed and lived there - in the framework of what is happening and what is important there. We are to be "Men For All Seasons" - in particular, this season.

Now, there are a lot of ways to describe and analyze "our season". It's the age of technology, the age of anxiety: a season marked by revolution and the emergence of the third world: a season of racial conflict and moral upheaval and change in areas as traditional as parenthood and family. In a recent book Anglican Bishop, John A. T. Robinson suggests that basic to any understanding of our age is the realization that we are living in the ("End of the Stable State.") It is the season of uncertainty - politically, economically, morally and especially religiously. ("People are genuinely bewildered") he writes. ("They feel they have lost their bearings - and that in the one area of life which they trusted would be an island of security in a sea of change. For religion told you what to believe, what to do and what to expect. But with even that dissolving there is anxiety and not a little resentment - and a hankering after fixed paints - however few".) (Ibid P. 16)

Our season is one of uncertainty - revolution - change. And it cries out for a faith that is alive to all of that: a Gospel that can stand the test of the world: and individual Christians who have the courage to cut the fat away from their religion and live honestly and relevantly in the world.

Yet Robinson was right: the temptation to scurry after the security of a day now gone is very real. The most popular kinds of religion today are those that ignore the world and are proud of it: that remain eloquently silent about the issues that constitute the world's agenda - issues that have to do with the life and health and well being of God's Children.

I have observed, first with interest - and then with distress - the success here and throughout the nation - of Key 73 - a massive evangelistic effort to bring the Gospel to every person on the continuent this year. It's not that I'm opposed to that goal: far be it. But I get angry when I watch people falling all over each other to give money for a bill-board that urges everyone to pray at noon: and not only ignoring - but opposing - Christian involvement in the Community Emergency Fund - because that's where the world is.

The season cries out for relevant Christians who are willing to be Christians on the world's agenda -which today includes war, and the use of bombing as an instrument of diplomacy, abortion, health and welfare, and the whole matter of national priorities. And the world's agony is answered by a campaign that urges churches to ring their bells and Christians toot their horns at noon.

The latest Gallup poll reveals that fewer Americans than ever see the Church as an influential and relevant force in our natioanal life. And everytime I see that bill board on 18th street I know exactly why.

If the world does set the agenda: if we are to be "Men for this season" = what is it that we take with us? What are those irrevocable basics for which we must live and stand and die? Taking a lead from John in the first century, we know that it is - or must be - brief - clear - sharp - understandable. The season is too treacherous to allow a lot of dogma - a whole train-load of theological freight. In one of his last books Bishop James Pike confessed that he was learning to believe less in terms of quantity - but more, in terms of the things that really mattered.

What is it we have to bring to the world? I would frame it in three very brief assertions:

→ Love is real

→ Jesus Christ is alive

→ Human life is to be ~~lived~~ lived as he defined it.

That's where integrity leads me: that's what I sense never changes and what this and every season asks of us. Again to borrow Robinson's words: "The love of God - this is man's ultimate environment, what he is made from and what he is made for... love is not only what ought to be the ultimate reality but what is." Or in John's words "Herein is love: not that we love God but that he loves us."

And Jesus Christ - whose name we use - and whom we call Lord: more than a good man and excellent teacher: more than memory and example: A presence - a power with us - freedom from death or fear of death: friend, brother, companion, prodder, stimulator, comforter sometimes and at other times disturber.

And life - my life - your life: it is defined by him: he is the model: as he loved so ought we: joy because we are safe and free, but compassion and heart-break because the world still has a long way to go. Commitment to the world in his name, but a loose commitment,

because no set back, no defeat in the world can separate me - us -from the love that sustains and heals and gives life itself.

Thomas More lost his life for being "A Man for All Seasons". Jesus Christ was crucified - and part of the reason was that he insisted on doing his living and loving in the world, where people lived and married and bore children and fought and got sick and felt grief and died. He died - at least in part - precisely because he was relevant.

So we need not expect that it's a simple and easy thing to be relevant Christians. Certainly when we're confronted with a bombed hospital in Hanoi, or a young sensitive Christian who wonders if killing another man is really a viable moral option - certainly its easier to talk in platitudes; and it's also irrevelant.

God calls us to be his people - here while we are together: but more importantly out there when we are living in his world. And in this age of uncertainty it's not always possible to define precisely what that will mean. Because the world is setting the agenda. Our styles will differ - we will be as marvelously free and as contrary to expectation as were our brothers and sisters in the second century.

But pray God, let us be honest and faithful: Men for All Seasons: His Men for this Season. AMEN

Father, it's always been easy to be religious: but it's never been easy to be an honest christian. Help us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen